3: DuBois OF5 Alor

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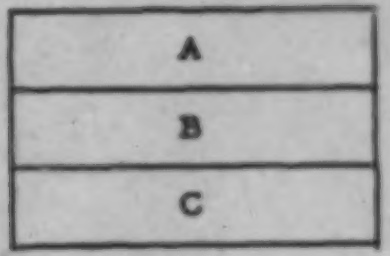

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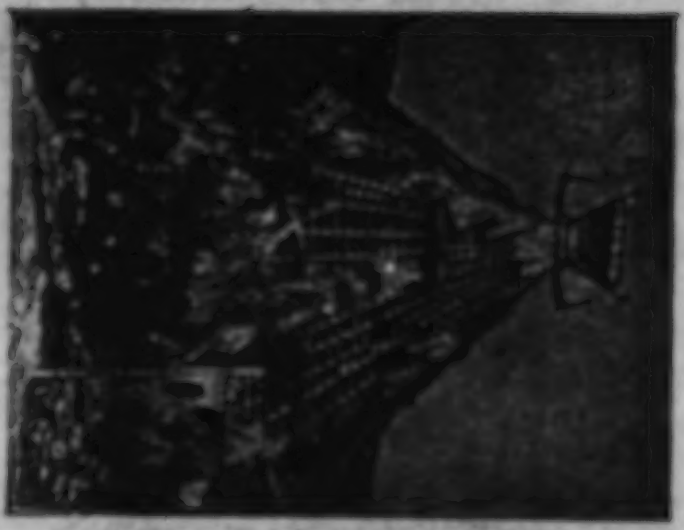

Срчта 87

Jesus carrying a pig, women baskets of grain, bring in a dowry payment (below). Food figures in both dowry and bride price (about three times the amount of the dowry), but the first payments and more important in the long dowry and settlements are in "money"

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Farmers (below), for whom this dowry payment is intended, but enjoyed himself in full regalia for the occasion. He wanders his gift-bearing guests going

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[illegible]

3: DuBois B-5 (1938-1939) 1940 GFS Alor GFS

HOW THEY PAY DEBTS IN ALOR

By CORA DU BOIS

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The *Francesia* was due the next morning on its second-to-the-world cruise, and soon Alor no longer seemed remote from the outside world. For all of its seventy thousand natives, there were only ten whites on the island that year. The other nine were Netherlands East Indies officials; as for me, I had come to live among the islanders for a year and a half in the somewhat anomalous position of an ethnographer. A bamboo-and-thatch house had been built for me up in a mountain village a day's journey from the coastal port of Kalabahi, where the Hollanders lived. Still, knowing that the *Francesia* was due in Kalabahi, I had set out at dawn, eager to see fellow countrymen and to speak English again after months of frustrating efforts in what passed for Dutch and Malay.

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Most of the six hundred villagers went down to the coast with me. The large ship, the crowds of strange whites and, above all, the exorbitant sums they were reputed to pay for everyday articles were tremendous drawing cards. Not that the Alorese had much use for Dutch money—they did need it to pay the government head tax and occasionally liked to spend it for some of the gaudy foreign goods on display in the Chinese shops, on their rare trips to the coast, but in their dealings amongst themselves they employed a quite different type of currency.

These mountain friends of mine need perhaps a word of explanation. When I had arrived in Alor some four months before, I thought that even the eighteen months I planned to stay would not be long enough to accustom me to them. Their singular ugliness, the long coarse black hair cylindrical-parched on the men's woolly hair, the black skins and pentagonal faces, the dirt and odors, the thousand and one strange impressions of an unfamiliar life and people seemed stronger than their essential humanity. Already, however, those first impressions had gone and I saw only a group of vivid personalities whose social and individual problems were becoming as real and as commonplace as those of any American community of six hundred. That their village was called Atimelang instead of Middletown, that their names were the euphonious Maliwoni, Kabidmani or Mahleba instead of

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the town Tom, Dick and Harry, had long since been forgotten as trivialities. So, as I stood the next day on the little cement pier of Kalabahi and watched the tropics land, the continent we presented had already faded. For me, their world and this one of Alor were already fused.

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The visitors drifted slowly through the small port of Kalabahi, staring at the lego-lego roofed dances specially staged for them, buying baskets and bows and arrows and bargaining eagerly for the expensive metal kettledrums called moko which are the prized and untold currency of Alor. I felt in the group a sense of disappointment and unease. Alor and its natives seemed wild and crude by comparison to the rich variety and elaborate beauty of Bali, from which they had just come. Since I was the only person who spoke English with any ease, many of the travelers stopped to chat with me and to express their utter amazement that I should be there and find life not too strange. It seemed impossible to convey to the gentleman from New York who was so concerned about the stock market that he and my black friend Madani were brothers under the skin, that both were financiers juggling the complex credit systems of their two cultures, suffering the harassments of insecurity and searching for stability and success with the same weapons. That one used dollars for currency and the other dealt in pigs, gongs and moko made, after all, but a slight difference. Both were essentially concerned with the immediacies of subsistence; both were concerned with worries about the prestige manipulation of finance. Before I grow tangled in similarities in general terms, it would be better to sketch how I had seen the economic wheels go round in the village of Atimelang.

512 At an altitude of twenty-five hundred feet even tropical nights can be cool. To sentient natives they seemed actually cold. So not until the six o'clock sunrise mist morning, when the mist came drifting out of the valley, did smoke begin to sift through the pyramidal thatch roofs and the muted tap of axes pounding indicate that breakfast was being prepared. As the sun rose higher and the dew began to dry, women climbed down the house ladders with their carrying bas-

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512 hats already hanging by themselves from their
slim-wrapped heads. Large fold knives were
thrust into their cord belts. They were off to the
day's work in the gardens, followed by a raging
chorus of infants protesting as violently as they
knew how at being left behind. A little later the
men came down, shivering and scratching, and
then were off to their day's work—the bargain-
ing and dunning necessary to maintain the
prestige finance system which was their honorific
prerogative. There were some men, of course,
who joined their wives in field work or who spent
the day caring for infants still too small to toddle
about alone, but these men were lower figures,
essentially the satellites of the financiers and
comparable in Malinowski only as a day laborer is
comparable to the gentleman from New York.
The only difference was that in Africa/ the two sexes lived, dressed and ate alike; a comparison which could hardly be made between the gentleman from New York and a day laborer.

§4.2 This early morning scene set the picture of
4.21 African life. Women were responsible for subsistence, men for finance. Theory gave each sex its just rewards. All vegetable foods belonged to the women, all ceremonies to the men. The ownership of food by the women held regardless of whether the field on which it was grown was hers or her husband's and how much labor the men might have contributed to its production. Conversely, the pig fattening in the pen under the house belonged to the man to dispose of as he saw fit, no matter how large a share of the feeding a woman might have done or whether it had been procured by her in the first place. This brings out the point that men and women were possessed of each others' skills but that their rewards and ownerships were divided. The theoretical picture gives the impression of mutual dependence, but in actuality this was not necessarily so. In fact there were several cases of men who lived alone quite comfortably and of women who did the same and were even able to skirt the edges of the male financial game. There was plenty of hostility between the sexes but never in terms of accomplishments. In fact one said admiringly of a man skilled in household tasks, "He is a woman-man," or vice versa when a woman showed skill in financial manipulations. It seemed to me that, despite frequent and violent quarrels between men and women, there was basically a greater respect between them than in our own society.

421 However, the relationship between the two sexes is an aside. The chief point is the division of properties, with the subsistence goods belonging to women and the money to men. Such a

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division can be made only where money is not the medium for securing the necessities of life as it is in the West. Of course the question immediately arises, "If the people of Ahlumbong do not buy food and clothing, if they pay no rent, what do they do with their currencies?" There are three main outlets. First, they pay off the obligations of parents' death feasts in order to placate and honor the ghosts. Second, they participate in the building of lineage houses. Third and most important of all, they buy wives. Formerly they also bought human heads as "ransom" for murdered kin, but certainly no heads have been taken in Alor for some twenty years and murder now brings retribution from the Netherlands government.

436 These transactions might seem straightforward and simple enough, but actually they are far from being so. Currencies, wherever they are used, seem to give rise to strange complexities of manipulation. Part of the complexity lies in the very nature of the currencies themselves. For example, pigs might seem at first blush to be primarily consumption goods, yet actually they do not so function in Alor nor are they so considered. Flesh is rarely eaten and only in connection with feast payments. A pig which dies or is killed accidentally leads immediately to giving a feast since it is unthinkable that a pig could be eaten casually. In fact, one way of hurting a man into giving feasts is to kill his pigs.

[34.2]

Mokos, or metal kettledrums, are the normal and chief currency standard into which the other currencies may be translated. The mokos themselves are not identical and their values do not run in a decimal series, although the counting system does. There is always latitude for disagreement on the exact value of a particular moko and particularly in equating pigs of varying sizes with mokos of varying types. Fantan may offer a pig worth a five-dollar moko in his estimation, but Maliamai, who is receiving the pig, will equate it with a moko worth only four dollars. The matter must then be arbitrated, usually stormily. Here we have the clue to masculine labor and why it can be so time-consuming. Lastly, a word about gongs. They are highly prized in themselves as musical instruments and are therefore not an fluid a currency as pigs and mokos. Only when the gongs are broken or worn out do they become a common medium of exchange.

Essentially the Alorese currency system rests on interest and credit. Mokos and gongs are not of local manufacture. They were imported from Java by Makassarese traders who brought them to the coast, where they were exchanged for

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936 goods. For the past half century native have no longer been imported, and the supply of currency is far less than the transactions of some seventy thousand inhabitants require. I was not able to make an actual estimate of the number of gouge, mokos and pigs on the island, but a government census some twenty years ago set the number of mokos at twenty thousand. This is undoubtedly an underestimation and it does not of course include gouge and pigs, but it does indicate that there is not a superabundance of currency. If there is a concept of profit and if there
936 is not an inexhaustible supply of currency, obviously one must resort to credit, and this is precisely what the Alorese have done. Like ourselves they consider credits as assets, so when a man is dying his last will consists of recounting to his heirs all his outstanding debts.

There are, however, certain marked differences between their system and ours. First, credit cannot be personified and, second, the profit system rests primarily on good will and not on law. In fact, there is no institutionalized law in Alor; there is only custom. The result of this is that hostilities are held in check because a man fears to alienate a person who may some day be the object of a profitable loan. Incidentally, this permits women, who are not principals in the financial game, to be much more outspoken than men. In addition to a system of profit which rests on good will, custom requires that one should never pay debts until they have been repeatedly and persistently demanded by the creditor. This places the Alorese financier in the irritating position of having to dun constantly for payments, tactfully yet forcefully enough to get paid with the promised profit. If he fails to be persistent enough, he will not be paid. If he fails to be tactful enough, there will be a quarrel, the upshot of which will be at best a return of the property borrowed, without the addition of interest. In other words, in Alor as elsewhere the profit system can break down but it breaks down into simple reciprocity.

536 On the other hand, wealth can also be used as an expression of rivalry. An insult may precipitate two rival financiers into an orgy of pig slaughtering until they and even their remotest kin have emptied their pens. Finally a halt is called and the pigs are reckoned. The man who has slaughtered most is entitled to a formalized ghost which begins: "Sopalish! The rooster's tail droops!" He then adds such insults and elaborations as the occasion and opponent furnish. However, the Alorese are a realistic and hard-headed lot and rarely allow themselves the luxury of such wasteful displays.

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613
476 A more usual outlay is for the building of lineage houses. This is the joint responsibility of all the descendants in the male line of a distinguished forebear, and the houses become the center of ceremonial activities. To build them, much heavy labor is needed, and in this labor the whole community is invited to help. In return the helpers are feasted, and that means both buying pigs and slaughtering one's own. Since there may be a dozen or more such feasts in the course of erecting a lineage house, construction may progress in short stages over a period of years to allow for the necessary accumulation of pigs.

437 The death feasts are another object of expenditure. When a man dies, certain of his kin,
764 the descendants of his mother's brothers, con-
602 tribute the shroud, grave services, pigs and mokes. These preliminary feasts and services occur during the first eight days after death. Then, anywhere from a year to twenty years later, two return feasts must be given at which the mother's brothers' descendants are repaid at high rates of interest, which must be agreed upon by negotiation. They may range as high as three hundred and four hundred per cent. Obviously not all the dead get such elaborate financial treatment. The small payoffs on the burial, those for children or young men and women may be made on a side issue when feasts for their more important kin are given. The bookkeeping involved in these elaborate and long-drawn-out transactions must be carried in people's heads. There is no system of writing, not even a system of tallies, to keep track of their complexity. One man who gave such a feast enumerated the transactions in connection with that ceremony alone. He had fifty-seven creditors and debtors involving two hundred items to remember. This was certainly no mean intellectual feat. I should hesitate to maintain a causal connection, but it is true that the singular accomplishments of the Ahoms in practical financial matters are paralleled by an equally singular lack of interest in what we should call abstract thinking or theorizing.

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589 The largest, most persistent exchange relation-
606 ship which a man establishes in his lifetime is with his wife's family. Marriage is in no way a religious or a ceremonial affair. It is essentially financial—the establishment of a system of group exchanges. There is first of all a bride price in mokes matched by a dowry in mokes. The dowry, however, is only about a third of the bride price. These exchanges are not paid all at once, but gradually over a period of many years. The girl goes to live in the boy's house when she pays the first and largest moke. After that the

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[illegible]

[illegible] bridegroom, in order repeated payments from his father-in-law, and his wife as well, to continue the series of agreed payments. A woman's loyalty, especially in the beginning, seems more often to be with her own family than with her husband, and she may even refuse agreed payments to a husband delinquent in his payment of the bride price. But this payment is useless to tell the whole story. There are also bride price and dowry exchanges in both lands and in negotiable goods. In fact, the affluent kin are always counted upon as a primary source of contributions when [illegible] even a financial enterprise is undertaken. In case [illegible] of divorce the difference between the bride price and dowry payments to date are reckoned and the difference must be paid back to the husband. Naturally, the longer a marriage lasts, the larger these sums become, with the result that the economic factor helps to stabilize marriages. It might appear at first blush that the divorce system favours the parties in a masculine group of females, and yields little there is equal stability to such estimates. However, not only is the woman valuable as a sex object and the producer of those children who will give man's death feasts, but she is the provider of food. Without a wife a man will have to work for his subsistence, and without her cooperation and good will he will not be able to raise the surplus rice and corn necessary for those very feasts on which his prestige rests. Her parents are very rich, even though they are not the ones chosen for social competition and prestige, and she knows how to use them.

[illegible] All this account has failed so far to give an idea of how a young man enters upon the financial role he is supposed to play on a more or less grandiose scale. The case of Sualaba is instructive in this connection.

When Sualaba was about fourteen he began thinking of marriage and the bride price he would have to accumulate. For helping his mother with the hut, hard tasks in the fields his mother and father gave him a piglet, partly as reward, partly to start him on his financial career. Sualaba took good care of it, feeding it regularly until it was large enough to exchange for a five-dollar snake. Unfortunately his father at that time was planning a death feast and high-handedly appropriated his son's pig. Sualaba was furious but helpless. He vowed angrily that he would never again raise pigs, a vow he stubbornly kept for years. Had his father lived, Sualaba might have had his help in buying a wife and his attitude about pig-raising might have had no very serious repercussions. Unfortunately, however, the father died and there [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

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[Cp. 486 B]